

SHARING THE STAGE

POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE CIVIC ROLE
OF ARTS ORGANISATIONS



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

UK BRANCH



SEMINAR LEARNING REPORT



Above: *We, The Crowd* was a 2016 Sharing the Stage production which explored what music and football mean to people aged from eight to 85 living in Newcastle's West End. Both professional and non-professional performers took part; for example members of the Royal Northern Sinfonia and students from a local primary school.

Front cover: Dancers from Chicago performing at the National Theatre of Scotland's *Home Away* festival in 2016. This festival was supported by the Sharing the Stage programme.

Sharing the Stage Policy and Practice: The Civic Role of Arts Organisations
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UK Branch

www.gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch

PREFACE

Our final Policy and Practice seminar for 2016 was spent focusing on the civic role of arts organisations, the subject of a multi year inquiry the Foundation is running.

We were privileged to have the seminar led as usual by François Matarasso. He is an expert in this field, and brings many years of experience, as well as his thoughtful disposition to this topic.

Guided by the three metaphors the Inquiry's panel devised in 2016, which are reprinted within this booklet, we examined arts organisations' civic role. Small groups discussed arts organisations' function as 'colleges' (places of learning), 'town halls' (places of debate) and 'parks' (places of meeting). We also explored the concept of arts organisations being 'hospitals' (places of well-being and health). You can read in detail the discussion we had within this report.

As the Arts Programme Manager I felt it was vital to have the Inquiry analysed by such a range of practitioners. I value the feedback from everyone present, as well as the subsequent work some have been involved in. The Inquiry will be highly consultative throughout its duration. In 2016 during Phase One of the Inquiry arts organisations across the country gave us their view in a series of workshops; in turn we plan to consult colleagues on the findings through an online survey from 10 July to 10 November 2017.

I would like to thank our colleagues at the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Paul Hamlyn Foundation for co-designing this seminar with us.

Kithmini Wimalasekera (Arts Programme Manager)

TURN was a 2016 Sharing the Stage performance created especially for Glasgow's Govan Graving Docks by theatre-maker Nic Green.



SEMINAR REPORT

THE INQUIRY INTO THE CIVIC ROLE OF ARTS ORGANISATIONS

Our final Policy and Practice seminar for 2016 with the Sharing the Stage learning group brought together members from nearly 50 arts organisations to examine the Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organisations.

WHAT IS THE INQUIRY INTO THE CIVIC ROLE OF ARTS ORGANISATIONS?

In our changing world, the Inquiry is designed as a space for arts organisations to consider our response to the political, social and economic factors that impact on our society, exploring how individual and collective actions can enable people's voices to be heard. It is an opportunity for the arts sector to reconsider its role in society through the frame of a civic role in the 21st century.

The Inquiry is highly consultative and driven by the sector, and focused on actions that will support organisational change and resilience in playing a civic role. It aims to galvanise the sector into a movement that is committed to being people-focused, collaborative and champions of the artistic and social value of the arts in the future.

Setting the scene

We were guided through this seminar by François Matarasso, member of the International Reference Group advising the Inquiry, and co-facilitator of the Sharing the Stage seminar series.

François began with a speech on the overlapping issues of democracy, access and power structures. He reminded us of the topic he explores in his work 'Parliament of Dreams': that in a democracy where there are formal structures for seeking representation, those who lack the confidence or knowledge of how these structures operate are disempowered in negotiating what they want. He said:

"An artistic life is a space where we can imagine, explore, make sense and challenge. It is a rich place for the negotiation of our values. The transformative power of the arts impacts on us all however we cannot put its impact into words. An informal artistic life is richer and more diverse than a formal life."

François reflected that for the first time the arts are on the losing liberal left side after a long time in power. François believes this is a moment for the sector to reflect and reimagine its relevance to the public. He quoted philosopher Charles Taylor who describes democracy as an ideal in which we believe in to give everyone a voice. He then said:

"The opportunity lies in creating spaces that are unique to arts organisations, where people can have a voice to reclaim democracy. The distinctive role of the arts is in supporting people to articulate concerns, beliefs, dreams and how people live out an artistic life in the broadest sense. By being agile, responsive and informal, the arts offer a different space that informs a formal democratic life. The inevitable challenge is in how these spaces work for dissenting voices and manage different values, whilst recognising that the arts sector has a reputation for being governed by the liberal elite."

“It is a holistic and collaborative endeavour with the sector to identify practice, infrastructure and policy levers of change. It is a philosophy, not a funding programme.”

Civic role of arts organisation

Before we discussed the Inquiry as a Learning Community, Andrew Barnett, Director of the UK Branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, described how this work builds on a long history of supporting the arts sector. Seminal publications by the Foundation include ‘Help for the Arts’ in 1959, ‘Going on the Stage’ in 1975, ‘The Arts Britain Ignores’ in 1976, ‘Voluntary Organisations Facing Change’ in 1976 and ‘The Point of Culture’ in 2014. These all set in motion radical new ways of thinking about practice, and influenced policy changes that were conducive to innovation. These works often included piloting approaches that have now become established mainstream practice. Andrew said a deep understanding of the nature of change is what enables the Foundation to influence systems to ensure long-term change is embedded.

Andrew told the crowd he believes the Inquiry is a natural progression for the Foundation in supporting arts organisations to future-proof themselves in our changing social, political and economic world. It is a holistic and collaborative endeavour with the sector to identify practice, infrastructure and policy levers of change. It is a philosophy, not a funding programme. Andrew pointed to the EU Referendum, saying it has given the Inquiry added urgency as the differences of life experiences across the country and the deep divides in public opinions have become starkly apparent. The Inquiry is an attempt to place arts organisations at the centre of finding a way to make sense of these changes, understand difference and connect people.

Benefits and risks

To unpack the complexities of what a civic role for arts organisations could mean, François offered two insights to preface the discussion on the benefits and risks. Firstly, John Berger’s ‘Ways of Seeing’ first published in 1972, offers a reminder of what people bring from our life experience to the act of seeing. Secondly, Don McCullin’s war photography in the 1960s which powerfully connected people to the realities of living in conflict zones, yet fell short of following up on that human connection with action.

With that in mind the attendees found consensus on the benefits of playing a civic role as opportunities to:

- Expand our learning and our worldview.
- Explore the unique offer of the arts as a place to dream, discover, explore and imagine. We must not lose sight of this and need to make a stand for the value of play, particularly in turbulent times.
- Connect with the whole of life experience, the whole person and a whole community beyond the limits of a project by creating pathways that enable people to access a range of public services.
- Offer communities a space for self-transformation and agency within the community.
- Embed diversity through civic engagement.
- Use the civic frame to connect across sectors.
- Embed co-production in the values and life of an arts organisation.
- Secure the future of the arts by being relevant.

The attendees also found consensus on the risks to be aware of as:

- Compromising on the artistic quality.
- Assuming a default role of the teacher, rather than the sector seeing itself as an integral part of society.
- Considering the arts as existing for itself, rather than the sector seeing itself as relational to the everyday.
- Taking on roles of the state by becoming a more cost effective public service and enabling a broken system.
- Disillusionment about being experts in social care.
- Overpromising and under-delivering.
- Creating ghettos of good work within organisations.
- Siloing communities based on how the sector works and local authorities manage public services such as domestic abuse, social care, etc.

The undercurrent to the discussion above was: do arts organisations have legitimate rights to play a role in civic life?

We then split into smaller groups to discuss in more detail how the civic role of arts organisations worked with the metaphors of colleges, town halls, parks, and on the theme of health and wellbeing. These are reviewed in more detail below.

The Sharing the Stage Learning Community divided into smaller groups to discuss the civic role of arts organisations.

Thoughts from the 'Colleges' group

This group reflected on how arts organisations offer a space for learning throughout a person's life, from the early years to older age. Creating ways to ignite curiosity, build awareness and knowledge, as well as develop skills for life; arts organisations offer neutral spaces with the power to engage a whole community. In the context of the changes in the labour market over the next ten to twenty years and increased automation, by supporting lifelong learning, art organisations can enable people to prepare for these changes and upskill.

The group also discussed that while arts organisations can have a rich offer for communities, there is much for arts organisations to gain. By acting as a college, it creates a two-way process whereby the organisation can learn from communities and tap into wider expertise and diverse lived experiences that may not be available within the organisation. They felt it is an unrealistic expectation for an organisation to think it has all the answers - there is value in not knowing.



“Transparency of process and co-design must be fundamental to building spaces that are based on how to attract people and serve their needs.”

Thoughts from the ‘Town Halls’ group

This group agreed that arts organisations offer a space for discussion, listening and enjoyment that goes beyond what a traditional town hall could offer. Town halls have formal structures where the public can have a voice as long as established rules are followed.

Arts organisations offer a nuanced place for the communities’ voices to come together, connect, appreciate difference and create. The distinction is significant in that arts organisations offer a space for communicating ‘what we want’, as opposed to a traditional town hall communicating ‘what the people want’. The opportunity for the sector lies in how we understand and maximise on that difference. The value of the town hall is in stimulating debate, but it must translate to action.

A key thought posed was: town halls have been given a legitimate role to represent people through our political process, so what then makes it legitimate for arts organisations to represent people? What is needed to legitimise the role of arts organisations in representing people?

Thoughts from the ‘Parks’ group

This group understood the idea behind this metaphor is that of a place which is open to everyone and where people from all walks of life can meet. They felt that on the surface this space suggests neutrality, yet in fact it masks a highly curated space colonised by those who know how to use it. It hides the hierarchical structure that governs it.

A more thoughtful approach that goes beyond simply offering an open door, is to consider how to engage people who do not know the space exists, to engage those who are not aware of an invitation to enter. Funding structures need to change to enable co-creation, build capacity to make connections and build lasting relationships. Transparency of process and co-design must be fundamental to building spaces that are based on how to attract people and serve their needs. These spaces need to be legible to people.

Thoughts from the ‘Health and Wellbeing’ group

Arts organisations can support individual and community health and wellbeing, this group agreed, but can also create spaces for fellowship and congregation that are akin to churches. Arts organisations can influence the health sector to support a transition from a medical to a social model. However, they thought the routes to influence are not clear. Arts organisations need to take a holistic view and be mindful of not becoming social engineers or offering temporary solutions. This area is becoming increasingly important as the wellbeing agenda gains momentum and local authorities take on responsibility for public health.

BRIEFING NOTE

THE METAPHORS

The following text was received by the attendees of the Sharing the Stage Learning Community before we met.

COLLEGES: arts organisations as places of learning

Education is about skills and creativity and about knowledge and experiences too; experience of the world we live in and its complexities, knowledge that acquaints us with our history and culture and that of others. The panel, as do we, thinks emphasis has rightly been placed on creative education and what happens in schools. However we also learn outside formal educational settings, and throughout our lives. The arts are integral to this. There are great examples of ways in which arts organisations have historically fulfilled this role: places of life-long learning. And there are many examples of arts organisations acting as places of learning today. We and the panel believe arts organisations have an important role to play in helping everyone to reach their potential.

As we look to the future, what greater role can arts organisations play in learning beyond the school gate for all generations? As imagination and creativity increasingly become fundamental for work in any sector and in building healthy communities, could arts organisations become the 'teaching hospitals' of the arts world, where people are trained up ready to go out into the world with artistic and creative skills? What should the relationships be between the other civic players who deliver education? Can arts organisations contribute to a new understanding of prosperity which incorporates artistic, creative, education and social as well as economic outcomes?

TOWN HALLS: arts organisations as places for debate

Art has always stimulated and reflected current debates about issues as diverse as human rights and gentrification. Pressing issues today include Brexit, climate change and ending poverty and inequality in all its forms. Trust in civic organisations is waning and even those who are expert in their fields are being questioned.

There is a risk inequality is regarded as too big an issue and therefore unsolvable. So how do we give arts organisations permission to tackle some of the really big issues? How do we give them permission to engage in politics? How can we tell 'activist' from 'traditional' organisations, when funding processes require the same language from all? How do we progress from small-scale arts initiatives around equality into large-scale political solutions? How do we make artists into politicians, and vice versa?

What can arts organisations do around the issue of trust in communities? Museums and libraries in particular are seen as trusted organisations.

As we look to the future we need a better understanding of the unique civic role that arts organisations play as neutral places for open discourse. Could they provide the platform upon which solutions to the intractable problems society faces are constructed and deployed? Can getting involved in neighbourhood arts result in people recognising their connections to places and the common ground they share with their fellow citizens? How might arts organisations best achieve this?

PARKS: arts organisations as public spaces

The space we share with our fellow citizens is important. Public space is becoming increasingly contested and in some places people feel crowded out of their communities, be it through gentrification or migration. Public parks, freely accessible for leisure and wellbeing for all, are a perfect example of the type of spaces our Panel felt are going to be needed in the future to maintain and develop community. People use parks with a sense of agency that can be lacking in other public spaces. You choose to go to a park, mix with others and do what you want to do rather than take part in activities others have programmed for you.

We need places where a plurality of viewpoint can be expressed and heard. Where disagreements can be safely heard and compromises reached. Arts organisations have a unique ability to challenge and express a wide range of viewpoints. They unsurpassed communicators of feelings. They shape the identity of places. They are placemakers enabling communities to thrive and attract new members as well as maintaining the health and vibrancy of existing communities.

As funding structures are re-imagined in local government and the civic infrastructure arts organisations had taken for granted disappear a step change in how arts organisations see and work with their communities is underway. To be truly civic arts organisations need to understand what 'belonging' means and to get better at understanding 'communities' not just the 'audience' subset of communities. As arts organisations move to seeing participation as co-creating rather than spectating they also need to decide how to inhabit the new public spaces they find themselves in.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The Foundation will be wrapping up Phase One of the Inquiry in the middle of 2017. We plan to publish a report in July with research into this topic and a collection of case studies of next practice from the sector to inspire the sector. Going forward we want to connect those who are interested in enacting a civic role to create a movement and work with arts funders and policy makers to reflect on how the funding system can be rethought to better support a civic role.

Find out more at
civicleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk

ABOUT THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with branches in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK Branch, based in London, is to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries (national borders, communities, disciplines and sectors) which deliver social, cultural and environmental value.

ABOUT THE ESMÉE FAIRBAIRN FOUNDATION

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve the quality of life for people and communities throughout the UK both now and in the future. We do this by funding a wide range of charitable work within the arts, children and young people, the environment, social change and food.
www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk



ABOUT PAUL HAMLYN FOUNDATION

Paul Hamlyn Foundation was established by Paul Hamlyn in 1987. Upon his death in 2001, he left most of his estate to the Foundation, creating one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK. Our mission is to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives. We have a particular interest in supporting young people and a strong belief in the importance of the arts.
www.phf.org.uk

